

COOPER MAKES REMARKS AT WHITE HOUSE HEALTH SUMMIT

February 25, 2010

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Right now, what I want to do is go to Jim Cooper, who I think everybody knows cares pretty deeply about the federal budget. He's been championing this for a very long time.

Jim, do you want to address some of the issues that have been raised in terms of both Medicare and Medicaid?

COOPER:

Thank you, Mr. President. We're all here. We're dressed up. We're on good behavior. But

I think folks back home are wondering how we behave when the camera's off. The deficit, in my opinion, is probably the most important single issue we face. Paul Ryan said it well: Health inflation is driving us off a cliff.

And I'm kind of intrigued by the conversation, because so far we've heard a lot of folks trying to outdo each other in deficit reduction. I welcome that competition, especially if it's backed up votes, because it's easy to talk tough on this. It's harder to deliver. I personally liked Senator McCain's suggestion. Let's get rid of all of the special deals. That's just a starting point.

Paul Ryan is right, again, and Tom Coburn is right when they point out that we're probably wasting a third of medical spending. Medicare alone is \$37 trillion in the hole. And that means, for all the folks who want to talk tough and not vote tough, that's not good enough. It means that for all the folks who want to do this next year or next decade or leave it to their successor, that's not good enough.

We've had some examples of how we've behaved recently. A wonderful bipartisan measure, the Conrad-Gregg bill, completely bipartisan for years, on a bipartisan fiscal responsibility commission was brought up for a vote in the Senate. We had the 60 votes, but only 53 people showed up for work. Seven people who'd been original co-sponsors of that measure suddenly got different ideas when the moment of truth came.

So, Mr.

President, I'm thankful you have appointed a presidential fiscal responsibility commission, with Alan Simpson and Erskine Bowles, to try to force us as a Congress and force the nation to address these fundamental problems, because if you love Medicare, you need to act to save it fast. Every day matters.

A report

will come out issued by the Treasury Department. It's come out every year. It'll come out in the next few days. It's the only report that uses real accounting to describe America's fiscal problems, and the news is not pretty. It will reaffirm what's been discussed here about Medicare and Medicaid and other vital American programs being deeply in the hole. And the opportunity of costs for delay is extraordinary.

So we can

face these problems, Mr. President. We can solve them with political will, but the talking points won't do it. We've got to acknowledge the real questions.

And as

every business person in America knows, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. And too many people in the federal government are refusing to measure it, much less take the tough votes that are required, because the reason we have a Medicare Advantage program, Mr. President, as you know, is in 2003, when the other party was completely in charge of everything here, we passed a program that before now was almost completely unfunded and added \$8 trillion in one bill to our children and grandchildren.

Now, those

benefits if offered should be paid for. So this is a challenge for everybody in both parties, because nobody's hands are clean in this, but let's have a new day, a new beginning. I think we could do this. And this bill is a great place to start, because if you don't think this bill reduces the deficit enough, according to CBO, vote for more savings. If you want to reform Medicare some more, vote for it. Don't just talk a good game.

So I hope

the American people are watching, because -- and they're going to be watching after the cameras are turned off, too. And I'm thankful you called this meeting, because this is a moment of truth for our country. And together, we can solve this problem.